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Mom and I drove home together so Dad could help Aunt May's friends load up the alpacas. I stared out the window as the town buildings changed into long, flat stretches of fields, old farm houses, dairy barns, and grain silos.

"How are you holding up, Al?" Mom's voice made me jump.

"Fine." I turned away from her and scowled out the window.

"You know, it's normal to feel upset when something like this happens." She reached over to touch my arm.

"I'm *fine*." I shook off her hand. Even I was a little surprised at how mean my voice sounded, but now that I had said it, I wasn't sure how to un-say it.

"You shouldn't frown like that."

Mom let it drop, but I could almost hear the wheels turning in her brain, analyzing. I didn't like feeling that she was inside my head, trying to figure me out. I scowled harder. I didn't exactly know what I was feeling, except that suddenly everything about Aunt May's death and funeral was weirding me out, and not in a nice,

normal, I-miss-my-dead-great-aunt way but in a freaky I-want-to-run-away-and-hide-from-everyone-and-not-think-about-this way.

We drove the rest of the way to the house in silence.

My parents held a reception for Aunt May in her cottage. The people from town arrived with cakes, pies, casseroles and other baked goods. I felt guilty about my behavior in the car, so I helped Mom arrange the food, a large urn of coffee, and pitchers of lemonade and iced tea on the shabby but sturdy oak table in Aunt May's kitchen. It was stuffy in the cottage after the heat of the day, so we opened the windows. There were no screens, but Mom said there probably wouldn't be too many bugs this late in the season. Once everything was set up and Dad arrived, my parents took pity on me and said I didn't have to stay if I didn't want to, so I slipped out the back door and trudged up the broad, grassy lane that led from the cottage to our house.

The lane ran down the middle of a large cornfield that we rented to our Amish neighbors. The corn had already been harvested for the year, the long, brown stalks dried and tied together into shocks that looked like giant teepees. When I was a kid, I used to play inside of them.

The tall grasses and timothy that bordered the lane gradually tapered into our back yard, near a grove of maple trees. Our tiny, antique farm house was over a hundred years old, storm-cloud gray with a rust-red metal roof and white trim. I steered past our garage, up a small hill to the back porch. The back door was unlocked, as usual. I pushed it open and a dark figure lunged toward me.

Two enormous paws landed on my shoulders, and my face was mopped by a pink tongue the size of a washcloth. I wrapped my arms around the neck of our oversized black German shepherd Socrates and stumbled backwards to push the screen door open again. He

bounded outside, a whirlwind of frenetic dog energy. My only dress was covered with faint, dusty paw prints and fur.

I went upstairs to change. My bedroom used to be two rooms, but my parents had removed a wall when I turned ten so I could have more space. Half of the room was my sleeping quarters—an antique four poster bed with a colorful patch quilt, a dresser, and a closet. The other half was my workspace—a large desk with my computers, a wall of built-in bookshelves crammed with books, and an old yellow rocking chair with a pink cushion that had been there since I was a baby. A fluffy black and white cat, one of five who lived in the house, lay curled in the middle of my bed.

I pulled off my dress and wadded it in the corner of my closet. A voice in my head told me that probably wasn't the right thing to do with it, but I ignored it. I squeezed into my favorite pair of jeans, pulled a clean T-shirt over my head, and went downstairs.

I rummaged through the refrigerator but didn't see anything I wanted. I settled for a diet pop and sat down at the kitchen table. I felt better just being alone and in my normal clothes. A stack of mail and a fat, gray cat sat on the table.

"Hey, Blue." I scratched under her chin and began flipping idly through the mail while she purred.

A crunch of gravel made me look out the window. A pretty Chinese girl wearing a backpack way too big for her small frame steered her bike down our driveway.

Andie Wu. My best friend.

I stepped onto the porch.

"I'm going to kill him," she growled as she leaned her bike against our garage. "Oh, I'm sorry, are you OK? How was the funeral?" She adjusted her backpack and made her way up the red brick walkway to the porch.

"I'm fine. It was weird. Who are you going to kill?"

"Mark, of course. Down Socks!" Andie's words

were preemptive as she saw the familiar black dog loping toward her. He pressed himself against her legs, tongue lolling, while she rubbed his neck.

“What happened?”

“He frickin’ asked Hope to go to Homecoming with him, that’s what happened.”

“*Hope?* Seriously? The freshman?”

“Seriously. After we stayed up until two last night texting.” Socrates bounded off again and Andie came up to the porch.

I handed her my still unopened can of pop and went inside to get another one for myself. “That seriously sucks. What in the world was he thinking?” I called over my shoulder from the kitchen.

Andie was fifteen, but we were both sophomores because I had skipped a grade, thereby dooming myself to be too young to do anything for the rest of my life. If it wasn’t for Andie, I probably would have been a complete social outcast.

“It’s not the fact that she’s cute that bothers me, but that she is *such* an airhead,” Andie said when I returned. “How can I have any respect for him after this?”

“Did he get his Ritalin dosage wrong this morning or something? I was sure he was going to ask you.”

Andie laughed, which made me happy, then hesitated. “You know Brett’s taking Tracy, right?”

Why did my heart start pounding faster just hearing the name? It annoyed me.

“No, but I figured.”

Brett Logan: seventeen, a senior, and the only guy I had ever kissed. We dated for three months over the summer, but he broke up with me when school started because suddenly I was too young for him. Tracy Sloane was also a senior and, he said, more mature.

Andie said mature was just a euphemism for something else.

She regarded me over her pop can as she took a

sip.

“So what was so weird about the funeral?”

I shook my head.

“Some of Aunt May’s friends were there, and they brought the alpacas, wore weird costumes, played these weird instruments.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not kidding.”

“This will be all over the Internet by tomorrow.”

“That’s exactly what I said. Please, can I have the brain back?”

Our inside joke that we shared a brain came from our propensity to finish each other’s sentences, say exactly the same thing at exactly the same time and win at Pictionary no matter how bad our drawings, as long as we were a team.

I sat down on a small bench next to the side of the house.

“I can’t wait until I graduate and can get the heck out of Ohio. Anyway, in addition to that weirdness, Aunt May dedicated a poem to me, of all things.”

“What poem?”

“Something by Theodore Roethke. I need to go look it up. Dad has a book of his poems in his study I think.”

“Oh, speaking of studies, I brought your assignments for you, and notes on the classes you missed, if you even need them. Mrs. Greene gave you a pass on the pre-calc problems, though. She said you would probably ace the test whether you did the exercises or not.”

“Actually, I already did them yesterday in study hall. I was bored.” I cringed a little admitting that.

Andie rolled her eyes at me.

“Of course you did. Anyway, I also brought all the notes that Mark and I passed in chemistry class after Mr. Steele confiscated our cell phones. I thought we could go

down to Walden and burn them.”

Walden was our name for a small pond hidden in the woods behind Aunt May’s cottage. Andie and I had named it after we snuck a copy of Henry David Thoreau’s book from my father’s study when we were in the sixth grade. I’m not sure we completely understood the book, but it seemed like a good name for a pond, and Walden had served as our secret hiding place and strategy-planning headquarters ever since. My dad, who had been to the real Walden Pond, said ours was a pathetic excuse for the real thing. He called it Walden Puddle.

Even from this distance we could see that there were only a few cars left in the private lane behind Aunt May’s cottage. Dad stood outside talking to someone. Was it Mr. Cutter again? What was up with him?

“It’s too bad about your Aunt May. She was pretty cool. Like, the kind of old lady I would like to be someday if I have to get old.”

I had thought the same thing more than once. Aunt May must have been in her late sixties or early seventies, but she was tall and thin and spritely somehow. Her hair was gray, but that sort of golden-gray color, so it made her look pretty instead of old. She was almost always cheerful, and was completely self-sufficient. My dad often said she had more energy than he did.

We watched as the last of the cars pulled away from the cottage, and my parents walked slowly, hand in hand, toward the house.

“Hey!” Andie turned to me. “Let’s ask your parents if we can spend the night in the cottage!”

“Aunt May’s cottage?”

“Yeah, I mean, it’s Friday. Unless you have plans, or something I don’t know about.”

She knew I didn’t. One of us almost always ended up at the other’s house on the weekends.

“Yeah, but, I mean, she just died. Isn’t that a little, I dunno, creepy?”

Andie snorted. “Oh, come on. It’ll be so cool. We can order a pizza and watch movies, assuming she has a DVD player down there. I brought all my overnight things anyway, just in case.” She pointed to her bulging backpack.

I watched my parents trudge up the hill. “All right, I’m game. We can ask them.”

“Hello, daughter. Hello, other daughter.” Dad said as he and Mom approached the porch.

“Hi Mr. and Mrs. Thomas. How was the reception?” Andie asked.

Mom sat down next to me on the bench and snatched my pop can.

“Exhausting,” she said, taking a sip and handing it back to me. “Oh, that tastes good. Allie, would you be a dear and go get one of those for me?”

“Me too!” Dad added as I stood up.

“Yes, master,” I said in my best Igor voice as I set my can down and headed for the fridge.

“What was the bet?” I heard Andie asking from out on the porch.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

I returned to the porch with the pop. Dad took my place on the bench next to Mom, and she was looking at him with an amused expression.

“I assume you are aware that your shirt says...” she said.

“I know what the shirt says. But I’m not going to talk about it.”

“Well, geez, Dad, you might have thought of that before putting it on. Or you could have just kept that poncho on over it,” I said.

I handed them their drinks and sat next to Andie on the porch.

“How bad could it be, anyway? It’s not like I have some inheritance you could have lost or something.”

“I don’t want to talk about it, because I’m not convinced I lost the bet yet,” Dad said. “But speaking of

inheritances, Aunt May, it turns out, left everything she owns to you.”

“To me?” I looked at Andie. “Seriously? Wait, what exactly does she own?”

“Pretty much nothing. I guess everything that’s in the cottage, her books and what little furniture she has. The alpacas. The cottage, of course, your Mother and I still own, despite Mr. Cutter’s best efforts.”

“He’s scary,” Andie said. “My mom said he bought Mrs. Schmidt’s property right out from under her after her husband died and she couldn’t afford the mortgage payments anymore. She lived there for forty years and had to move into a nursing home. Mr. Cutter tore the house and barn down to build condominiums.”

“‘Heritage Estates,’ I believe he named them,” Mom said drily.

“He apparently just bought a bunch of land on the other side of our property as well, and for some reason he wants to add our cottage to his acreage,” Dad said, looking serious. “He offered me more money than it’s worth.”

“I don’t even get why he was at the funeral to begin with,” I said.

“He and Aunt May go way back,” Mom said.

“You’re kidding me. They were friends?”

“Hardly friends,” Mom said. “I don’t know all the details, but I do know they grew up together. Mr. Cutter is just a few years younger than May. I get the feeling there was some type of rivalry between them, and that he was always trying to prove himself to her.”

“Prove himself? What does he have to prove? Seems like he has everything, he’s so rich and all.”

“Teachable moment, daughter,” Dad said, using his most pedantic voice. “Being rich and having a lot of material possessions won’t necessarily make you happy.”

“Is this my punishment for not going to church? You’re going to preach to me anyway?”

We grinned at each other. Dad was always surprisingly cool about my not going to church, even though he was a pastor. It wasn't that I didn't believe in God, just that I wasn't sure I believed in God the way everyone else was saying I should believe in God.

"At any rate, I don't like the thought of him being our new neighbor," Mom said. "Who knows what he's planning to do with that land? He might put up oil wells."

"I should go put up some more "No Trespassing" signs in the woods tomorrow," Dad said.

"So I assume you're *not* going to sell the cottage to him, right?" Why did I feel nervous at the idea?

"Of course not," Dad assured me. "We would never do that."

Andie nudged my foot with her toe.

"Oh, yeah, so, um, speaking of the cottage, Andie and I were wondering if we could spend the night down there."

Mom and Dad looked at each other as if they were communicating telepathically.

"Isn't that a little creepy?" Dad asked.

"Yeah, well, ask her," I jabbed a thumb toward Andie.

"Oh, come on," Andie said. "It's not like we're going to see Aunt May's ghost or something. And even if we did, she'd probably be a pretty cool ghost."

"I guess that's true," Dad said.

"I suppose it would be all right," Mom said. "The phone still works down there, and you have your cells. I would feel better if you took Socrates with you, though."

At the sound of his name, Socrates' head popped up from a hole he was digging in the yard. He looked at us with his ears cocked and head tilted to one side, then bounded over to the porch. He plopped down on his haunches in front of Mom and gazed at her adoringly, nose caked with dirt, eyes expectant.

Mom laughed and stood up. "Well, now I've done

it, I better get him a biscuit. Do you girls want to take the sleeping bags down there? I'm not sure what May has in terms of sheets. Oh, and if you could do me a favor and clean up the kitchen and put away the food. I put the perishable items in the fridge, but we were so tired, we left everything else out. I planned to go back down later, but you could save me a trip."

"Sure thing, Mrs. Thomas." Andie, as the guest, was more polite than I would have been.

I ran upstairs and threw my overnight things in my backpack. When I got back downstairs, Mom had taken the sleeping bags out of the closet for us, and Dad was testing the battery in a yellow flashlight the size of a large brick.

"Here, better take this with you, in case you need to come back up to the house for anything."

"And take a sweatshirt, Allie," Mom added. "There's supposed to be a cold front moving through tonight. We may actually see normal fall weather tomorrow."

I pulled a blue hoodie off the pegs next to the back door and tied it around my waist. I shouldered my backpack and picked up one of the sleeping bags.

Andie was already waiting for me. "Ready, Freddy?"

"Ready!" I replied. "C'mon Socks!"

The sun was just starting to set as we set off down the lane toward the cottage. Socrates trotted ahead of us carrying an enormous branch in his mouth, turning his head over his shoulder periodically to make sure we were still following. I wondered where he thought we were going. The breeze was cooler and dark gray clouds gathered on the horizon, moving in our direction.

We walked in silence until the lane forked, the right path leading into our woods and the left to Aunt May's property. We veered left, while Socrates took off into the woods on some unexplained dog mission.

Two ancient silver beech trees just past the woods towered over the eastern edge of Aunt May's property. The cottage was about three hundred feet away, a tiny wood shingled house, painted a rather boring off-white at the moment, with a gray shingled roof, red brick chimney, and dark red shutters with pineapples cut out of the center hanging on either side of the windows.

The old red barn where the alpacas lived lay behind the cottage, next to the large paddock enclosed by the black post and beam fence my father built. The barn was dark and the paddock was empty. Apparently, the strangers hadn't returned with the alpacas yet. That was odd. What could they be doing with them?

We walked up a short path of uneven, mossy paving stones to the front door of the cottage. A welcome mat with a picture of a gnome in a blue hat standing under a mushroom greeted us with the phrase *Gnome Sweet Home*. OK, that was a little tacky. Like the barn, the cottage was dark, and eerily silent in the fading evening light. For the first time, it hit me that Aunt May wouldn't be coming back. I shivered.

My parents had left the front door unlocked, and I eased it open.

I stepped over the threshold, listening intently. An old cuckoo clock tick-tocked in the living room directly across from the entryway.

"Hello?" I called out, immediately feeling stupid. Who did I think would be here? Andie stepped up behind me and we both peered around in the dim light.

"Creepy!" I announced in a cheerful, singsong tone.

"Oh get over it," Andie put her hands on my shoulders and pushed me forward.

A small wooden staircase to the right of the entrance led upstairs to Aunt May's sleeping loft. I walked past it toward the kitchen, Andie following closely behind me. When I reached the kitchen door I stopped, and she

bonked into me.

“Ow! Stop it!” We both started giggling. I fumbled along the wall with my hand until I found the light switch.

The kitchen seemed smaller to me than it had when I was a kid. The wood-topped counter I stood at so many times roughly divided the room in half, with the cooking area in front of us and the kitchen table on the other side of it, in the corner of the room. The food was still spread out on the table where we placed it earlier, and the windows were still open, blue checkered curtains puffing in the breeze. Not much had been eaten. A few dishes and cups were stacked in the sink, a few left sitting out on the counters.

“We might as well leave the food out for now,” Andie said. “Maybe we won’t need to order pizza after all.”

“Yeah. C’mon, let’s go see what Aunt May left me.”

The kitchen dining area opened into the living room. A large picture window faced the back yard with a view of the barn and paddock. Two bright blue squishy sofas sat on either side of a coffee table piled with books. Across the room, the cuckoo clock ticked on the mantle above a fireplace, and in the corner to the right, books splayed across Aunt May’s writing desk. Books were stacked two rows deep on the bookshelves that lined the walls. If the shelves were full, books were stacked on top of the bookcases, or on the floor next to them. Andie dropped her sleeping bag and backpack to the floor and flicked on a lamp.

“So... your Aunt May liked to read?”

“Yeah, I mean, I remember lots of books in here, but I didn’t remember it being this bad.” I dumped my backpack and sleeping bag in the corner and rummaged through one of the piles on the coffee table.

“Hey, Andie, listen to this.” I picked up the first book on the pile. “*The Book of Useful People.*” I continued flipping through them. “*The Importance of Color, Famous*

Gatekeepers, The Book of Useful Phrases...”

“Hey, let me see that.” Andie took the last book from my hand and opened it.

“Chapter One: Please go away,” she read.

We both laughed.

“What else is there?” I asked, grabbing a new book.

A loud crash from the kitchen interrupted us. We froze and stared at each other.

“Are those windows still open?” Andie asked.

“Oh, man. I wonder if a raccoon or squirrel smelled the food and crawled in.” I rushed back to the kitchen, with Andie following.

I stopped abruptly at the entrance, causing Andie to run into me again.

And then I screamed.

At first I thought it was a squirrel or raccoon that had snuck in through the open windows, lured by the assortment of treats. But even before I finished screaming I realized that the little creature standing in the middle of Aunt May’s kitchen table was definitely not a rodent or four-legged mammal of any sort.

He was about twelve inches tall, wearing a green tweed coat, brown trousers, and a pair of wooden clogs on his stocking-clad feet. A red Santa hat flopped down over his snowy-white hair and beard. He had frosting on his face, a fistful of cake in each hand, and enormous blue eyes, wide with terror. When I screamed, he opened his mouth and started shrieking, a high pitched wail that quickly rose to a hysterical, siren-like noise. Big globs of cake dropped out of his mouth, and crumbs sprayed around the table.

Andie started screaming too, making three of us. The tiny Santa creature turned red and looked increasingly hysterical, waving his cake-filled hands and running in circles around a pie on the table. He looked so ridiculous that my scream turned to a laugh.

“It’s OK, it’s OK! Shh! You win! Please stop!” I begged.

Andie put a hand to her chest and leaned into the wall.

I crept toward the kitchen table with my hands outstretched, hoping this was a universal symbol for *I’m not dangerous*.

“It’s OK! I’m not going to hurt you.”

He stopped screaming, panting a little from his effort.

“My name’s Allie,” I said, feeling ridiculous. “I’m Aunt May’s—May, she’s the woman who used to live here—I’m her great niece, which is, like, a type of relative, I mean she’s my mom’s aunt, but we all call her Aunt May.”

I cringed. That probably would have left even a real person confused.

He breathed heavily, regarding me warily.

“Do you have a name? Did you know Aunt May?”

Could he even understand a word I was saying?

He pressed his lips together and swallowed hard. He wiped the remaining cake from his hands onto his stockings, grabbed his jacket lapels, and stood up very straight.

“My name is Pettikin—Pettikin Periwinkle, but you can call me Pettikin. I’m a gnome,” he said in a small, clear voice.

I heard a thud behind me. Andie had fainted and was slumped on the kitchen floor.